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SOME GREEK GRAVE INSCRIPTIONS.¹

Just outside the Dipylon gate at Athens stands a Greek grave monument dating from the fourth century B. C. Like many of its companions, it is temple-shaped, and the statue it once contained has disappeared. Cut into the piece of blue Hymettus marble that forms its base is an epitaph in verse, the thought of which is as follows: "It is no task to seek praise for noble men, but for them fair words without stint are ever found, even such as thou hast gained, O Dionysus, and now by the common lot of all thou sharest Persephone's couch. Here earth covers thy body, O Dionysus, but thine immortal soul is in the keeping of the steward of all, etc."

In the last line we have one of the few allusions to the future found in the Greek grave inscriptions. Yet they have an interest all their own, for here as nowhere else do we get an insight into the popular ideas on this subject. I offer here some of the results of a comparison, by no means complete, of this inscription with other Greek grave inscriptions of a similar nature.

Two things are noticeable at the start: first, that almost all those inscriptions containing references to the future are couched in verse, and, secondly, that they are remarkably few. The fact that they are in verse is not to be taken as corroborative evidence of their paucity. For a careful examination of a modern graveyard will show a preponderance of poetry to prose in those epitaphs where reference to the other life is made. But the fact that they are few cannot be denied. Out of some three hundred and more I examined, only thirty-five or forty references to the other life were found.² In no case did I find a stronger statement than that given in the epitaph cited above. This would lead us to believe that any popular notion of immor-

¹ Abstract of paper read before the Classical Conference of the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club, Ypsilanti, March 31-April 1, 1904.

² These will be cited according to the numbers in KAIBEL'S *Epigrammata Graeca*. ROHDE'S work referred to is *Psyche*, Vols. I and II, 3d Ed.

tality, in the modern sense of that word, was unknown to the masses of the Greeks. But this does not mean that they did not have some hazy ideas as to a life in the other world. This is to be gathered in several ways.

In the first place, it will be noted how often the epitaph is worded as though the dead man were addressing the passer-by.¹ Sometimes this greeting is in the form of an entreaty: "Hail, wayfaring stranger! Do not ridicule my lot" (284); sometimes in the form of a threat: "Let no wicked man remove my gravestone" (166). In still other inscriptions a dialogue is represented as taking place between the dead and the passer-by: "Tell me what was thy country? Who art thou and of what parentage? My name is Cornoutus. My fatherland is Prousia, and my father is [name lacking]. How long didst thou live? Until my twentieth year, when at two months past I died. Where? In the land of the Cecropians. Tell me this: what were your studies?" (110). From a broken line we get the word *ῥητορικῆν*, from which it is evident that he was a student of oratory. Some of these dialogues are rather droll: "Who and whence art thou? Klados is my name. Who fostered thee? Menophilus. Of what didst thou die? Of the fever. And at what age? Thirteen. Wast accomplished? Not much. The muses loved me not" (247).

The large number of epitaphs thrown into this form, when taken in connection with the fact that the graves were placed by the roadside, show that the dead were still thought to sustain some sort of connection with this world. The *chaire* of the passer-by was thought to pierce even the dull ear of the dead and bring cheer into his phantom existence. It is more than probable that this feeling of fellowship and sympathy between the living and the dead was but a mute expression of the longing of those left behind for those they had lost. Sometimes this feeling of sympathy united in an object of common interest, as in the touching inscription over a mother who, dying, left two sons (386). The younger had erected the monument to his mother, and in return for this act of filial piety the dead woman begs the passer-by to pray for her boy.

¹ So in KAIBEL, *op. cit.*, 22 and 23.

Still more significant is the use of the words *χρηστός* and *ἥρωσ* in these inscriptions. So in 48 a nurse is spoken of as *χρηστῆ τιθῆ*, and the writer of the epitaph knows that she will be honored in the world below, "if there is honor among the *excellent*." And again reference is made to "all things whatsoever is wanted to occur to the *noble* (*χρηστοῖς*) dead" (137). Originally the word *ἥρωσ* was applied to characters like Theseus of Athens, and of course it was natural that they should continue their existence in the world to come by virtue of their own inherent excellence; and they enjoyed special worship accordingly. But later the word was used in a broader sense, and was applied to those distinguished from their fellows by an excellence of their own. So Pausanias, writing during the second century of our era, states that at that time games were celebrated and speeches held in honor of Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylæ¹. In late antiquity the word was used of the dead very much as we use the word "saint" (191, 192, 228). In both cases the application of these terms to the dead show that they were thought to have entered upon an existence superior in power and dignity to that on earth.

There is also abundant evidence from these inscriptions that the soul was thought to exist separate from the body. This is very plainly stated in the epitaph first cited (35). So in 261: "An immortal spirit, I dwell in the homes of the Olympians, but earth covers my mortal body." Still more tersely in 315: "Æther (=the upper air) holds my pious soul; the light dust my body." Others might be cited to the same effect (*cf.* 41).

In all these inscriptions it seems taken for granted that the separation of soul and body is final. There is no hint of a resurrection or of a final reunion of soul and body in another life. Just why this notion never took hold upon the Greeks is hard to say. It was not entirely strange to them either in their theology or literature. The descent of Hercules to Hades was an old story, and every Greek boy was familiar with the account of Odysseus's adventures in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*.

The locality where this separate existence of the soul was spent was very vague in the minds of the ordinary Greek, if we

¹ PAUSANIAS, 3, 14, 1.

may judge by their grave inscriptions. The locality most frequently mentioned is "æther," which is sometimes alluded to as simply "æther," or "moist æther," or "æther of Zeus" (188), etc., showing that it was but a general term for the regions of the upper air. The other expressions used are scarcely more definite. They are "the Elysian fields" (414, 338), evidently derived from Homer's the "islands of the blessed," "the hall halls of Zeusa" (338), "the dwellings upon Olympus" (261, 159), "the home of the heroes" (228), and sometimes still more vaguely as "the land of the blessed" (324) or simply "to the gods" (340). According to the old classic notion, all the dead were thought to go to Hades, but different regions were assigned to the happy and the wretched. So in *The Frogs* of Aristophanes the happy mystics are far removed from the miserable parricides and perjurers who lay in the lake of ordure. The conceptions which raised the soul from the realms of night and made it the companion of Zeus and the blessed gods in the upper air are evidently of later origin. In them no doubt is to be traced the influence of the philosophers' schools which in the course of centuries had begun to make themselves felt among the masses. The contrast is certainly striking between the simple and dignified, though negative, statements of the earlier epitaphs, and the flowery and detailed descriptions of the other life, as we find them on the gravestones of later times. We have such a description of the Greek heaven in 312: Night, the sleep-bringer, takes away the light of day, setting the soul free from many sorrows. It darts away into the upper air like a breath from the nostrils. It sees the bright shining of the goddess of dawn in the dwelling of the gods. It shares in the converse of the immortals. It dwells with the blessed in the starry heavens, and seated on a golden throne amid tripods and ambrosial tables partakes of the feast. And so, as the delight and charm of this life faded, men began to let the fancy linger all the more on the delights of the life to come.

Another interesting fact about these inscriptions is that we find almost no reference to a retribution or final righting of this

¹ ROHDE, Vol. II, p. 368.

world's wrongs in the world to come. Occasionally such a thought is suggested, as in 502, where it is stated that the soul had gone to its deserts (*ἐς τὰ δίκαιον*). The possibility of a final judgment is also alluded to in 215 (*cf.* 514, 5). But these references stand almost alone. For the ordinary Greek there was no sharp line of demarkation between good and bad in the other world. There were no *εὐσεβείς ἀσεβείς*, no sheep and goats. The fine balance of the Greek genius prevented him from peopling the other world with the terrors of a Dante's hell. He was not tormented with a conviction of sin, nor was he Pharisee enough to exult in the enjoyment of a special pardon. He did not live in dread of a lake that burneth with fire and brimstone unquenchable. But, as we have seen, he faced his end with calmness, if not with hope, believing that in the other world he would come to his deserts. Thus the Attic epitaphs of the best period harmonize thoroughly with the spirit of the Attic grave reliefs. Their calm dignity and matchless taste are splendid testimonials to the superiority of a race which did not lose its poise even at the grave.

And yet it cannot be denied that, with all their beautiful self-restraint, there is more of melancholy than of hope expressed in these epitaphs. We can argue this from their very silence as to the soul's fate after death. A people so fond of speech and so gifted in expression would certainly have left on record more fully their thoughts on this great question, had they cherished a fixed and strong hope of immortality. Only at long intervals, and with a faint and uncertain sound, do they touch upon this note. From this we are forced to conclude that a belief in the immortality of the soul by virtue of its own inherent power and life, and apart from the body, was never generally accepted by the masses of the Greek people.

The form of belief in the continued life of the soul that gained the widest acceptance is that given in Homer. It was a dim and shadowy existence in the halls of Persephone and ancient Night. So it is spoken of in the inscriptions. Sometimes it is referred to as the "hall of Lethe"¹. There the dead were thought to live a

¹ROHDE, Vol. II, p. 382.

joyless phantom existence from which light and hope had fled. So Odysseus, when he visited the "strengthless heads of the dead" in Hades, found that even the shade of his dead mother did not have the power to recognize her son until she drank of the black blood he guarded.¹ May this not suggest to us the explanation of that lurking fear that seemed to have haunted the minds of even those who expressed a hope of another life that in that disembodied existence the souls would not have the power to recognize each other? Hence we find in 61 the expression: "if, my child, there be recognition among the dead". Compare also the phrase in 48, line 6: *εἴπερ χρηστοῖς γέρας ἐστίν*. This lends a peculiar pathos to the epitaph of a wife who, dying, left a husband and five children. She is made to say: "Weep not, dear husband, for when you too have journeyed to that land, you will make search for your wife Eutychia" (266). It need not surprise us, then, that an "if" often prefaces any reference to the other life: "If there be anything in the world below;"² "If there be intelligence in Tartarus or Lethe" (700, 1); "If there be recognition among the dead". Sometimes this doubt gives place to utter hopelessness. So in 298, already referred to, the dead woman is made to say: "Who writes farewell over my ill-starred name? Who foolishly confers this favor upon me? For no longer do I hear, nor see the light of day. She who lies beneath the sod is but dust and ashes." As the strong pulse of ancient life weakened and men began to lose the joy of living, expressions of this kind became more and more frequent. Nothing could be more hopeless than the following: "I was not; I was; I shall be no more. It matters not to me."³ Sometimes the words are added: "If anyone say otherwise, he lies."⁴ In Hellenistic and Roman times there is reason to believe that this expressed the belief of many of the common people. In 646 we have an interesting Greek epitaph discovered at Rome, in which the dead man is at considerable pains to let us know what his belief was: "Pass not by my epitaph, wayfarer, but pause and hear, and, having learned its lesson, go your way. There is no boat, no

¹*Odyssey*, XI, 152.

²ROHDE, Vol. II, p. 395, note 2.

³ROHDE, Vol. II, p. 393.

⁴ROHDE, *Ibid.*

ferryman Charon in Hades, no porter Æacus, no dog Cerberus. We, the dead below, are all dust and ashes, nothing more. I have told you the truth. Begone, wayfarer, lest even a dead man bore you with his prattle." Then, as though addressing friends and relatives who mourn for him, he continues: "Weep not. Grace my stele with no garlands. It is but a stone. Kindle no funeral pyre. It is idle expense. Share with me what you have while I live. By giving drink to ashes you will produce but clay. A dead man is no toper. This is my fate, and when you heap the earth on these remains, say that I who was not have lived and returned to earth again."

It was but natural that a faith like this should have called forth many a bitter protest from the human heart. We find traces of such feelings also on the Greek gravestones. I shall close by referring to two or three of these. The first I would mention is that of a young Greek maiden of Athens who died in her fifteenth year in the midst of her bloom (127). With characteristic Greek moderation, there is no passionate outcry, no use of extravagant language. By such expressions as *δαίμων ὀπικρὸς* and *μοιρῶν ἄνισος μίτος* show us how keenly the loss was felt and how bitter seemed the injustice of fate. But, after all, it was the Greek mother who felt this despair the most because she loved the strongest. Rohde¹ cites the epitaph of a Greek mother who, after having lost her two children, was herself claimed by death at last—Death, whom she calls "the universal oppressor, with a heart as cruel and pitiless as that of the wild beast of the field." I know of nothing in all Greek literature so full of pathos and the anguish of a mother's heart as a mother's lament for her newborn babe given us in Kaibel 371: "Fate deprived me of my babe when it had gained but a taste of life. Whether it be for good or ill I cannot say. Oh insatiable Hades! Why did you rob me of my little one so cruelly? Why art thou so hurried? Are we not all thy debtors?"

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¹Vol. II, p. 394.